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VERIFICATION OF TRANSLATION

Sir:

The undersigned hereby states that the attached English language patent application is an accurate translation of the Japanese language document filed on March 17, 2004, and assigned Serial No. 10/802,675.

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**DROPLET EJECTION APPARATUS AND
METHOD OF JUDGING EJECTION FAILURE IN DROPLET EJECTION HEADS**

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

[0001] Technical Field

[0002] The present invention relates to a droplet ejection apparatus and a method of judging an ejection failure in droplet ejection heads.

[0003] Background Art

[0004] An ink jet printer, which is one type of droplet ejection apparatus, forms an image on a predetermined sheet of paper by ejecting ink drops (droplets) via a plurality of nozzles of a printing head of the ink jet printer. The printing head (ink jet head) of the ink jet printer is provided with a number of nozzles. However, there is a case where some of the nozzles are blocked due to an increase of ink viscosity, intrusion of air bubbles, adhesion of dust or paper dust, or the like, and therefore, these nozzles become unable to eject ink droplets. When the nozzles are blocked, missing dots occur within a printed image, which results in deterioration of image quality.

[0005] As far, a method of optically detecting a state where no ink droplets are ejected through the nozzles of the ink jet head (a state of failing ink droplet ejection) for each nozzle of the ink jet head was devised as a method of detecting such an ejection failure of an ink droplet (hereinafter, also referred to as the missing dot) (for example, Japanese Laid-Open Patent Application No. Hei. 8-309963 or the like). This method makes it possible to identify a nozzle causing the missing dot (ejection failure).

[0006] In the optical missing dot (droplet ejection failure)

detecting method described above, however, a detector including a light source and an optical sensor is attached to a droplet ejection apparatus (for example, an ink jet printer). Hence, this detecting method generally has a problem that the light source and the optical sensor have to be set (or provided) with exact accuracy (high degree of accuracy) so that droplets ejected through the nozzles of the droplet ejection head (ink jet head) pass through a space between the light source and the optical sensor and therefore intercept light from the light source to the optical sensor. In addition, since such a detector is generally expensive, the droplet ejection apparatus having the detector has another problem that the manufacturing costs of the ink jet printer are increased. Further, since an output portion of the light source or a detection portion of the optical sensor may be smeared by ink mist through the nozzles or paper dust from printing sheets or the like, there is a possibility that the reliability of the detector becomes a matter of concern.

[0007] Further, although the optical missing dot detecting method described above can detect the missing dot, that is, an ejection failure (non-ejection) of ink droplets of the nozzles, the cause of the missing dot (ejection failure) cannot be identified (judged) on the basis of the detection result. Hence, there is another problem that it is impossible to select and carry out appropriate recovery processing depending on the cause of the missing dot (ejection failure). For this reason, for example, ink may be pump-sucked (vacuumed) from the ink jet head under circumstances where a wiping process might be sufficient for recovery. This increases discharged ink (wasted ink), or causes several types of recovery processing to be carried out because appropriate recovery processing is not carried out, and thereby reduces or deteriorates throughput of the ink jet printer (droplet ejection apparatus).

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0008] It is an object of the invention to provide a droplet ejection apparatus and a method of judging an ejection failure in droplet ejection heads which can judge an ejection failure in the droplet ejection heads and a cause thereof based on a subtraction result obtained by subtracting the number of pulses in a signal, which oscillates in response to changes in an electric capacitance component of an actuator after a droplet ejection operation.

[0009] In order to achieve the above object, in one aspect of the invention, the invention is directed to a droplet ejection apparatus. The droplet ejection apparatus of the invention includes:

- a plurality of droplet ejection heads, each of the droplet ejection heads including:

- a diaphragm;

- an actuator which displaces the diaphragm;

- a cavity filled with a liquid, an internal pressure of the cavity being increased and decreased in response to displacement of the diaphragm; and

- a nozzle communicated with the cavity through which the liquid is ejected in the form of droplets in response to the increase and decrease of the internal pressure of the cavity;

- a driving circuit which drives the actuator of each droplet ejection head;

- oscillation means which generates a signal on the basis of a residual vibration of the diaphragm displaced by the actuator after driving the actuator by the driving circuit;

- subtracting means which subtracts the number of pulses, which are included in the signal generated by the oscillation means for a predetermined time period, from a predetermined reference value; and

- judging means for judging whether or not an ejection failure is occurring in the droplet ejection heads on the basis of the subtraction result by the subtracting means.

[0010] In the droplet ejection apparatus of the invention, the oscillation means oscillates in response to the residual vibration of the diaphragm displaced by the actuator when an operation in which the liquid is ejected through the nozzle in the form of droplets by driving the actuator (i.e., droplet ejection operation). The number of pulses, which are included in the signal generated by the oscillation means for a predetermined time period, is subtracted from a predetermined reference value. Then, it is detected whether the droplet has been normally ejected or has not ejected on the basis of the subtraction result.

[0011] According to the droplet ejection apparatus of the invention, in comparison with the conventional droplet ejection apparatus capable of detecting an ejection failure, the droplet ejection apparatus of the invention does not need other parts (for example, optical missing dot detecting device or the like). As a result, not only an ejection failure of the droplets can be detected without increasing the size of the droplet ejection head, but also the manufacturing costs of the droplet ejection apparatus capable of carrying out an ejection failure (missing dot) detecting operation can be reduced. In addition, because the droplet ejection apparatus of the invention detects an ejection failure of the droplets through the use of the residual vibration of the diaphragm after the droplet ejection operation, an ejection failure of the droplets can be detected even during the recording operation.

[0012] The residual vibration of the diaphragm referred to herein means a state in which the diaphragm keeps vibrating while damping due to the droplet ejection operation after the actuator carried out the droplet ejection operation according to a driving signal (voltage signal) from the driving circuit until the actuator carries out the droplet ejection operation again in response to input of the following driving signal.

[0013] Further, in the droplet ejection apparatus of the invention, it is preferable that the judging means judges a cause of the ejection failure when it is judged that the ejection failure is occurring. It is preferable that the judging means judges that: an air bubble has intruded into the cavity in the case where the subtraction result is smaller than a first threshold, the liquid in the vicinity of the nozzle has thickened due to drying in the case where the subtraction result is larger than a second threshold, and paper dust is adhering in the vicinity of the outlet of the nozzle in the case where the subtraction result is smaller than the second threshold and larger than a third threshold. In this case, it is preferable that the droplet ejection apparatus of the invention further includes storage means for storing the cause of the ejection failure judged by the judging means. In this regard, in the invention, "paper dust" is not limited to mere paper dust generated from a recording sheet or the like. For example, the "paper dust" includes all the substances that could adhere in the vicinity of the nozzles and impede ejection of droplets, such as pieces of rubber from the advancing roller (feeding roller) and dust afloat in air.

[0014] Moreover, it is preferable that the droplet ejection apparatus of the invention further includes switching means for switching a connection of the actuator from the driving circuit to the oscillation means after carrying out a droplet ejection operation by driving the actuator. In this case, it is preferable that the oscillation means includes a resistance component connected to the actuator, and forms a CR oscillation circuit based on the electric capacitance component of the actuator and a resistance component of the resistor element.

[0015] Here, in the droplet ejection apparatus of the invention, it is preferable that the predetermined time period includes one or more time period in the residual vibration of

the diaphragm when the droplet is normally ejected from the droplet ejection head. In this case, it is preferable that the predetermined time period is a time period until the residual vibration is generated after the droplet has been normally ejected from the droplet ejection head, or a time period until a half cycle of the residual vibration of the diaphragm after the droplet has been normally ejected from the droplet ejection head. Alternatively, it is preferable that the predetermined time period includes time periods of every half cycle of the residual vibration of the diaphragm after the droplet has been normally ejected from the droplet ejection head. In addition, it is preferable that the predetermined time period is a time period until a quarter cycle of the residual vibration of the diaphragm after the droplet has been normally ejected from the droplet ejection head, or the predetermined time period includes time periods of every quarter cycle of the residual vibration of the diaphragm after the droplet has been normally ejected from the droplet ejection head.

[0016] Further, in the droplet ejection apparatus of the invention, it is preferable that the predetermined reference value is the number of pulses in the signal generated by the oscillation means for the predetermined time period when the droplet is normally ejected from the droplet ejection head. Furthermore, it is preferable that the judging means judges whether or not an ejection failure is occurring in the respective droplet ejection heads on the basis of the subtraction result obtained by the subtracting means when the oscillation means generates the signal by scanning each of the plurality of droplet ejection heads.

[0017] In the droplet ejection apparatus of the invention, it is preferable that the actuator includes at least one of an electrostatic actuator and a piezoelectric actuator having a piezoelectric element and using a piezoelectric effect of the piezoelectric element. Further, it is preferable that the

droplet ejection apparatus of the invention includes an ink jet printer.

[0018] In another aspect of the invention, the invention is directed to a method of judging an ejection failure of droplet ejection heads. Each of the droplet ejection heads includes a diaphragm, an actuator, a cavity and a nozzle. The method includes the steps of:

generating a signal with an oscillation circuit on basis of a residual vibration of the diaphragm after carrying out an operation in which a liquid within the cavity is ejected through the nozzle in the form of droplets by driving the actuator with a driving circuit and thereby displacing the diaphragm;

subtracting the number of pulses, of which the signal generated by oscillation means is generated for a predetermined time period, from a predetermined reference value; and

judging whether or not an ejection failure is occurring in the droplet ejection heads on the basis of the subtraction result.

[0019] It is preferable that the method further includes the step of judging a cause of the ejection failure when it is judged that the ejection failure is occurring. In this way, it is possible to obtain effects similar to the effect in the droplet ejection apparatus of the invention mentioned above.

[0020] It is preferable that the cause judging step includes the steps of: judging that an air bubble has intruded into the cavity in the case where the subtraction result is smaller than a first threshold; judging that the liquid in the vicinity of the nozzle has thickened due to drying in the case where the subtraction result is larger than a second threshold; and judging that paper dust is adhering in the vicinity of the outlet of the nozzle in the case where the subtraction result is smaller than the second threshold and larger than a third threshold. In addition, it is preferable that the method further includes

the step of storing the judgment result in a storage section.

[0021] Furthermore, it is preferable that the method further includes the step of switching a connection of the actuator from the driving circuit to the oscillation circuit after carrying out a droplet ejection operation by driving the actuator. Moreover, it is preferable that the predetermined time period is one or more time period in the residual vibration of the diaphragm when the droplet is normally ejected from the droplet ejection head, which includes: a time period until the residual vibration is generated after the droplet has been normally ejected from the droplet ejection head; a time period until a half cycle of the residual vibration of the diaphragm after the droplet has been normally ejected from the droplet ejection head; time periods of every half cycle of the residual vibration of the diaphragm after the droplet has been normally ejected from the droplet ejection head; a time period until a quarter cycle of the residual vibration of the diaphragm after the droplet has been normally ejected from the droplet ejection head; and time periods of every quarter cycle of the residual vibration of the diaphragm after the droplet has been normally ejected from the droplet ejection head.

[0022] In this case, it is preferable that the predetermined reference value is the number of pulses, which are included in the generated signal for the predetermined time period when the droplet is normally ejected from the droplet ejection head.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0023] The above and other objects, features, and the advantages of the invention will readily become more apparent from the following detailed description of preferred embodiments of the invention with reference to the accompanying drawings.

[0024] FIG. 1 is a schematic view showing the configuration of an ink jet printer as one type of droplet ejection apparatus of the invention.

[0025] FIG. 2 is a block diagram schematically showing a major portion of the ink jet printer (droplet ejection apparatus) of the invention.

[0026] FIG. 3 is a schematic cross sectional view of an ink jet head in the ink jet printer shown in FIG. 1.

[0027] FIG. 4 is an exploded perspective view showing the configuration of the head unit 35 shown in FIG. 1 corresponding to one color of ink.

[0028] FIG. 5 shows one example of a nozzle arrangement pattern in a nozzle plate of the head unit using four colors of inks.

[0029] FIG. 6 is a state diagram showing respective states of a cross section taken along the line III-III of FIG. 3 when a driving signal is inputted.

[0030] FIG. 7 is a circuit diagram showing a computation model of simple harmonic vibration on the assumption of residual vibration of the diaphragm shown in FIG. 3.

[0031] FIG. 8 is a graph showing the relationship between an experimental value and computed value of residual vibration of the diaphragm shown in FIG. 3 in the case of normal ejection.

[0032] FIG. 9 is a conceptual view in the vicinity of the nozzle in a case where an air bubble has intruded into the cavity shown in FIG. 3.

[0033] FIG. 10 is a graph showing the computed value and the

experimental value of residual vibration in a state where ink droplets cannot be ejected due to intrusion of an air bubble into the cavity.

[0034] FIG. 11 is a conceptual view in the vicinity of the nozzle in a case where ink has fixed due to drying in the vicinity of the nozzle shown in FIG. 3.

[0035] FIG. 12 is a graph showing the computed value and the experimental value of residual vibration in a state where ink has thickened due to drying in the vicinity of the nozzle.

[0036] FIG. 13 is a conceptual view in the vicinity of the nozzle in a case where paper dust is adhering in the vicinity of the outlet of the nozzle shown in FIG. 3.

[0037] FIG. 14 is a graph showing the computed value and the experimental value of residual vibration in a state where paper dust is adhering to the outlet of the nozzle.

[0038] FIG. 15 shows pictures of the nozzle states before and after adhesion of paper dust in the vicinity of the nozzle.

[0039] FIG. 16 schematically shows the ejection failure detecting means shown in FIG. 2, and is a block diagram showing a switching operation between a oscillation circuit (oscillation means) and a driving circuit.

[0040] FIG. 17 is a conceptual view in the case where the electrostatic actuator shown in FIG. 3 is assumed as a parallel plate capacitor.

[0041] FIG. 18 is a circuit diagram of an oscillation circuit including the capacitor constituted from the electrostatic actuator shown in FIG. 3.

[0042] FIG. 19 is a timing chart of a subtraction operation of the subtraction counter shown in FIG. 16.

[0043] FIG. 20 is a drawing showing residual vibration waveforms in the respective states of the ink jet head.

[0044] FIG. 21 is a diagram showing one example of a subtraction result of the subtraction counter and a judgment result of the judging means based on the subtraction result.

[0045] FIG. 22 is a drawing showing a relationship between the causes of the ejection failure and outputs of respective reference values.

[0046] FIG. 23 is a flowchart showing ejection failure detecting processing in one embodiment of the invention.

[0047] FIG. 24 is a schematic block diagram of the ejection failure detecting means shown in FIG. 2 in another embodiment of the invention.

[0048] FIG. 25 shows residual vibration waveforms in the case where a count time period is a half cycle of the residual vibration at a normal ejection operation.

[0049] FIG. 26 shows residual vibration waveforms in the case where a count time period is a quarter cycle of the residual vibration at a normal ejection operation.

[0050] FIG. 27 is a timing chart (every half cycle) of the subtraction processing of the subtraction counter shown in FIG. 24.

[0051] FIG. 28 is a drawing showing one example (every half cycle and every quarter cycle) of the subtraction results of the subtraction counter and the judgment result of the judging

means based on the subtraction result.

[0052] FIG. 29 is a drawing showing a relationship between the causes of the ejection failure and the outputs of the respective reference values (every half cycle and every quarter cycle).

[0053] FIG. 30 is a flowchart showing the ejection failure detecting processing in another embodiment of the invention.

[0054] FIG. 31 is a cross sectional view schematically showing an example of another configuration of the ink jet head of the invention.

[0055] FIG. 32 is a cross sectional view schematically showing an example of still another configuration of the ink jet head of the invention.

[0056] FIG. 33 is a cross sectional view schematically showing an example of still another configuration of the ink jet head of the invention.

[0057] FIG. 34 is a cross sectional view schematically showing an example of still another configuration of the ink jet head of the invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

[0058] Preferred embodiments of a droplet ejection apparatus and a method of judging an ejection failure in droplet ejection heads of the invention will now be described in detail with reference to FIGS. 1-34. It is to be understood that these embodiments are mentioned for the purpose of illustration of the invention and interpretations of the content of the invention are not limited to these embodiments. It should be noted that, in the embodiments described below, an ink jet printer that

prints an image on a recording sheet (droplet receptor) by ejecting ink (liquid material) will be described as one example of the droplet ejection apparatus of the invention.

[0059] (First Embodiment)

[0060] FIG. 1 is a schematic view showing the configuration of an ink jet printer 1 as one type of droplet ejection apparatus according to a first embodiment of the invention. Now, in following explanations using Fig. 1, an upper side and lower side are referred to as "upper" and "lower," respectively. First, the configuration of the ink jet printer 1 will be described.

[0061] The ink jet printer 1 shown in FIG. 1 includes a main body 2. A tray 21 on which recording sheets P may be placed, a sheet discharge port 22, through which the recording sheet P is discharged, and an operation panel 7 are respectively provided in the rear of the top, in the front of the bottom, and on the top surface, of the main body 2.

[0062] The operation panel 7 is provided with a display portion (not shown) for displaying an error message or the like, such as a liquid crystal display, an organic EL display, an LED lamp or the like, and an operation portion (not shown) comprising various kinds of switches or the like.

[0063] Further, the main body 2 mainly includes a printing device 4 equipped with printing means (moving element) 3 which undergoes a reciprocating motion, a feeder (feeding means) 5 which feeds and discharges a recording sheet P to/from the printing device 4 one by one, and a control section (control means) 6 which controls the printing device 4 and the feeder 5.

[0064] The feeder 5 intermittently feeds recording sheets P

one by one under the control of the control section 6. The recording sheet P passes by the vicinity of the bottom of the printing means 3. In this instance, the printing means 3 reciprocates in a direction substantially perpendicular to the feeding direction of the recording sheet P, thereby carrying out a printing operation on the recording sheet P. In other words, the printing operation by the ink jet method is carried out so that the reciprocating motion of the printing means 3 and the intermittent feeding of the recording sheet P constitute the main scanning and the sub scanning of printing, respectively.

[0065] The printing device 4 is provided with the printing means 3, a carriage motor 41 serving as a driving source for moving the printing means 3 (making it to reciprocate) in the main scanning direction, and a reciprocating mechanism 42 which receives rotations of the carriage motor 41 and making the printing means 3 to reciprocate in the main scanning direction.

[0066] The printing means 3 includes a plurality of head units 35 on which a plurality of nozzles 110 are provided in accordance with ink types, a plurality of ink cartridges (I/C) 31 each respectively supplying the head units 35 with inks, a carriage 32 on which the head units 35 and ink cartridges 31 are mounted.

[0067] Further, as will be described in FIG. 3, the head unit 35 is provided with a number of ink jet recording heads (i.e., ink jet heads or droplet ejection heads) 100 each comprising a nozzle 110, a diaphragm 121, an electrostatic actuator 120, a cavity 141, an ink supply port 142, and the like. In this regard, although FIG. 1 shows the configuration in which the head units 35 and the ink cartridges 31 are included, the invention is not limited to this configuration. For example, the invention may include a configuration in which the ink cartridges 31 are provided in another place instead of being mounted on the carriage 32, and communicates with the head units 35 via tubes or the like to supply inks thereto (not shown in the drawings).

Hereinafter, the configuration in which the plurality of ink jet heads 100, each of which comprises the nozzle 110, the diaphragm 121, the electrostatic actuator 120, the cavity 141, the ink supply port 142, and the like, are provided will be referred to as the "head unit 35".

[0068] By using cartridges respectively filled with four colors of inks, including yellow, cyan, magenta, and black, as the ink cartridges 31, full-color printing becomes possible. In this case, the head units 35 respectively corresponding to the colors are provided in the printing means 3. Here, FIG. 1 shows four ink cartridges 31 respectively corresponding to four colors of inks, but the printing means 3 may be configured to further include an ink cartridge or ink cartridges 31 for other ink such as light cyan, light magenta, or dark yellow a special color or the like.

[0069] The reciprocating mechanism 42 includes a carriage guide shaft 422 supported by a frame (not shown) at both ends thereof, and a timing belt 421 extending in parallel with the carriage guide shaft 422.

[0070] The carriage 32 is supported by the carriage guide shaft 422 of the reciprocating mechanism 42 so as to be able to reciprocate and is fixed to a part of the timing belt 421.

[0071] When the timing belt 421 is run forward and backward via a pulley by the operation of the carriage motor 41, the printing means 3 is guided by the carriage guide shaft 422 and starts to reciprocate. During this reciprocating motion, ink droplets are ejected through the nozzles 110 of the plurality of ink jet heads 100 in the head units 35 as needed in response to image data (printing data) to be printed, thereby carrying out printing operation onto the recording sheet P.

[0072] The feeder 5 includes a feeding motor 51, serving as

a driving source thereof, and a feeding roller 52 which is rotated in association with the operation of the feeding motor 51.

[0073] The feeding roller 52 comprises a driven roller 52a and a driving roller 52b which vertically face across a transportation path of a recording sheet P (i.e., a recording sheet P). The driving roller 52b is connected to the feeding motor 51. This allows the feeding roller 52 to feed a number of recording sheets P placed on the tray 21 to the printing device 4 one by one, and discharge the recording sheets P from the printing device 4 one by one. Instead of the tray 21, a feeding cassette in which the recording sheets P can be housed may be removably attached.

[0074] The control section 6 carries out a printing operation on a recording sheet P by controlling the printing device 4, the feeder 5 and the like according to the printing data inputted from a host computer 8 such as a personal computer (PC), a digital camera (DC) or the like. The control section 6 also controls the display portion of the operation panel 7 to display an error message or the like, or an LED lamp or the like to be turned ON/OFF, and controls the respective portions to carry out corresponding processes according to press signals of various switches inputted from the operation portion.

[0075] FIG. 2 is a block diagram schematically showing a major portion of the ink jet printer of the invention. Referring to FIG. 2, the ink jet printer 1 of the invention is provided with an interface portion (IF) 9 for receiving printing data or the like inputted from the host computer 8, the control section 6, the carriage motor 41, a carriage motor driver 43 for controlling the driving of the carriage motor 41, the feeding motor 51, a feeding motor driver 53 for controlling the driving of the feeding motor 51, the head units 35, a head driver 33 for controlling the driving of the head units 35, and ejection failure detecting means 10. In this regard, the ejection

failure detecting means 10 will be described later in detail.

[0076] Referring to FIG. 2, the control section 6 is provided with a CPU (Central Processing Unit) 61 which carries out various types of processes such as a printing process, ejection failure detection processing or the like, an EEPROM (Electrically Erasable Programmable Read-Only Memory) (storage means) 62 as one kind of nonvolatile semiconductor memory for storing the printing data inputted from the host computer 8 via the IF 9 in a data storage region (not shown), a RAM (Random Access Memory) 63 for temporarily storing various kinds of data when the ejection failure detection processing or the like (described later) is carried out or temporarily opening up application programs for printing processes or the like, and a PROM 64 as one kind of nonvolatile semiconductor memory in which control programs and the like for controlling the respective portions are stored. The components of the control section 6 are electrically connected to each other via a bus (not shown).

[0077] As described above, the printing means 3 is provided with the plurality of head units 35 respectively corresponding to the colors of inks. Further, each head unit 35 is provided with a plurality of nozzles 110 and the plurality of electrostatic actuators 120 respectively corresponding to the nozzles 110 (i.e., the plurality of ink jet heads 100). In other words, each head unit 35 is configured to include a plurality of ink jet heads 100 (droplet ejection heads) each comprising a set including a nozzle 110 and an electrostatic actuator 120. The head driver 33 comprises a driving circuit 18 for driving the electrostatic actuators 120 of the respective ink jet heads 100 to control ejection timing of inks, and switching means 23 (see FIG. 16). In this regard, the configuration of the ink jet head 100 and the electrostatic actuator 120 will be described later.

[0078] Although it is not shown in the drawings, various kinds

of sensors capable of detecting, for example, a remaining quantity of ink in each of the ink cartridges 31, the position of the printing means 3, printing environments such as temperature, humidity and the like are electrically connected to the control section 6.

[0079] When the control section 6 receives printing data from the host computer 8 via the IF 9, the control section 6 stores the printing data in the EEPROM 62. The CPU 61 then executes a predetermined process on the printing data, and outputs driving signals to each of the drivers 33, 43, and 53 according to the processed data and input data from the various kinds of sensors. When these driving signals are respectively inputted through the drivers 33, 43, and 53, the plurality of electrostatic actuators 120 corresponding to the plurality of ink jet heads 100 in the respective head units 35, the carriage motor 41 of the printing device 4, and the feeder 5 start to operate individually. In this way, a printing operation is effected on a recording sheet P.

[0080] Next, the structure of the ink jet head 100 in each head unit 35 in the printing means 3 will now be described. FIG. 3 is a schematic cross sectional view of one ink jet head 100 in the head unit 35 shown in FIG. 1 (including common components such as the ink cartridge 31). FIG. 4 is an exploded perspective view schematically showing the configuration of the head unit 35 corresponding to one color of ink. FIG. 5 is a plan view showing an example of a nozzle surface of the printing means 3 adopting the head unit 35 in which the plurality of ink jet heads 100 are provided shown in FIG. 3. It should be noted that FIGS. 3 and 4 are shown upside down from the normally used state, and FIG. 5 is a plan view when is viewed from the top of the ink jet head 100 shown in FIG. 3.

[0081] As shown in FIG. 3, the head unit 35 is connected to the ink cartridge 31 via an ink intake port 131, a damper chamber

130, and an ink supply tube 311. The damper chamber 130 is provided with a damper 132 made of rubber. The damper chamber 130 makes it possible to absorb fluctuation of ink and a change in ink pressure when the carriage 32 reciprocates, whereby it is possible to supply the respective ink jet heads 100 in the head unit 35 with a predetermined quantity of ink in a stable manner.

[0082] Further, the head unit 35 has a triple-layer structure, in which a silicon substrate 140 in the middle, a nozzle plate 150 also made of silicon, which is layered on the upper side of the silicon substrate 140 in FIG. 3, and a borosilicate glass substrate (glass substrate) 160 having a coefficient of thermal expansion close to that of silicon, which is layered on the lower side of the silicon substrate 140. A plurality of independent cavities (pressure chambers) 141 (seven cavities are shown in FIG. 4), one reservoir (common ink chamber) 143, and grooves each serving as an ink supply port (orifice) 142 that allows communication between the reservoir 143 and each of the cavities 141 are formed in the silicon substrate 140 of the middle layer. Each groove may be formed, for example, by applying an etching process from the surface of the silicon substrate 140. The nozzle plate 150, the silicon substrate 140, and the glass substrate 160 are bonded to each other in this order, whereby each of the cavities 141, the reservoir 143 and each of the ink supply ports 142 are defined therein.

[0083] Each of these cavities 141 is formed in the shape of a strip (rectangular prism), and is configured in such a manner that a volume thereof is variable with vibration (displacement) of a diaphragm 121 described later and this change in volume makes ink (liquid material) to be ejected through the nozzle (ink nozzle) 110. The nozzles 110 are respectively formed in the nozzle plate 150 at positions corresponding to the portions on the tip side of the cavities 141, and communicate with the respective cavities 141. Further, the ink intake port 131

communicating with the reservoir 143 is formed in the glass substrate 160 at a portion where the reservoir 143 is located. Ink is supplied from the ink cartridge 31 to the reservoir 143 by way of the ink supply tube 311 and the damper chamber 130 through the ink intake port 131. The ink supplied to the reservoir 143 passes through the respective ink supply ports 142 and is then supplied to the respective cavities 141 that are independent from each other. In this regard, the cavities 141 are respectively defined by the nozzle plate 150, sidewalls (partition walls) 144, and bottom walls 121.

[0084] The bottom wall 121 of each of the independent cavity 141 is formed in a thin-walled manner, and the bottom wall 121 is formed to function as a diaphragm that can undergo elastic deformation (elastic displacement) in the out-of-plane direction (its thickness direction), that is, in the vertical direction of FIG. 3. Consequently, hereinafter, the portion of this bottom wall 121 will be occasionally referred to as the diaphragm 121 for ease of explanation (in other words, the same reference numeral 121 is used for both the "bottom wall" and the "diaphragm").

[0085] Shallow concave portions 161 are respectively formed in the surface of the glass substrate 160 on the silicon substrate 140 side, at the positions corresponding to the cavities 141 in the silicon substrate 140. Thus, the bottom wall 121 of each cavity 141 faces, with a predetermined clearance in between, the surface of an opposing wall 162 of the glass substrate 160 in which the concave portions 161 are formed. In other words, a clearance (air gap) having a predetermined thickness (for example, approximately 0.2 microns) exists between the bottom wall 121 of each cavity 141 and a segment electrode 122 described later. In this case, the concave portions 161 can be formed by an etching process, for example.

[0086] The bottom wall (diaphragm) 121 of each cavity 141

forms a part of a common electrode 124 on the respective cavities 141 side for accumulating charges by a driving signal supplied from the head driver 33. In other words, the diaphragm 121 of each cavity 141 also serves as one of the counter electrodes (counter electrodes of the capacitor) in the corresponding electrostatic actuator 120 described later. The segment electrodes 122 each serving as an electrode opposing the common electrode 124 are respectively formed on the surfaces of the concave portions 161 in the glass substrate 160 so as to face the bottom walls 121 of the cavities 141. Further, as shown in FIG. 3, the surfaces of the bottom walls 121 of the respective cavities 141 are covered with an insulating layer 123 made of a silicon dioxide (SiO_2) film. In this manner, the bottom wall 121 of each cavity 141, that is, the diaphragm 121 and the corresponding segment electrode 122 form (constitute) the counter electrodes (counter electrodes of the capacitor) via the insulating layer 123 formed on the surface of the bottom wall 121 of the cavity 141 on the lower side of FIG. 3 and the clearance within the concave portion 161. Therefore, the diaphragm 121, the segment electrode 122, and the insulating layer 123 and the clearance therebetween form the major portion of the electrostatic actuator 120.

[0087] As shown in FIG. 3, the head driver 33 including the driving circuit 18 for applying a driving voltage between these counter electrodes carries out charge and discharge of these counter electrodes in response to a printing signal (printing data) inputted from the control section 6. One output terminal of the head driver (voltage applying means) 33 is connected to the respective segment electrodes 122, and the other output terminal is connected to an input terminal 124a of the common electrode 124 formed in the silicon substrate 140. Because the silicon substrate 140 is doped with impurities and therefore has conductive property by itself, it is possible to supply the common electrode 124 of the bottom walls 121 with a voltage from the input terminal 124a of the common electrode 124.

Alternatively, for example, a thin film made of an electrically conductive material such as gold, copper, or the like may be formed on one surface of the silicon substrate 140. This makes it possible to supply a voltage (electric charges) to the common electrode 124 at low electric resistance (efficiently). This thin film may be formed, for example, by vapor deposition, sputtering, or the like. In this embodiment, for example, because the silicon substrate 140 and the glass substrate 160 are coupled (bonded) to each other through anode bonding, an electrically conductive film used as an electrode in this anode bonding is formed on the silicon substrate 140 on the channel forming surface side (i.e., on the top side of the silicon substrate 140 shown in FIG. 3). This electrically conductive film is directly used as the input terminal 124a of the common electrode 124. It should be appreciated, however, that in the invention, for example, the input terminal 124a of the common electrode 124 may be omitted and the bonding method of the silicon substrate 140 and the glass substrate 160 is not limited to the anode bonding.

[0088] As shown in FIG. 4, the head unit 35 is provided with the nozzle plate 150 in which a plurality of nozzles 110 corresponding to the plurality of ink jet heads 100 are formed, the silicon substrate (ink chamber substrate) 140 in which a plurality of cavities 141, a plurality of ink supply ports 142, and one reservoir 143 are formed, and the insulating layer 123, all of which are accommodated in a base body 170 containing the glass substrate 160. The base body 170 is made of, for example, various kinds of resin materials, various kinds of metal materials, or the like, and the silicon substrate 140 is fixed to and supported by the base body 170.

[0089] The plurality of nozzles 110 formed in the nozzle plate 150 are aligned linearly and substantially parallel to the reservoir 143 in FIG. 4 to make the illustration simple. However, the alignment pattern of the nozzles 110 is not limited to this

pattern, and they are normally arranged in a manner that steps are shifted as in the nozzle alignment pattern shown in FIG. 5, for example. Further, the pitch between the nozzles 110 can be set appropriately depending on the printing resolution (dpi: dot per inch). In this regard, FIG. 5 shows the alignment pattern of the nozzles 110 in the case where four colors of ink (ink cartridges 31) are applied.

[0090] FIG. 6 shows respective states of the cross section taken along the line III-III of FIG. 3 when a driving signal is inputted. When a driving voltage is applied between the counter electrodes from the head driver 33, Coulomb force is generated between the counter electrodes, whereby the bottom wall (diaphragm) 121 then bends (is attracted) towards the segment electrode 122 from the initial state (FIG. 6(a)) so that the volume of the cavity 141 is increased (FIG. 6(b)). When the electric charges between the counter electrodes are discharged abruptly at this state under the control of the head driver 33, the diaphragm 121 restores upward in the drawing due to its elastic restoring force, whereby the diaphragm 121 moves upwards above its initial position at the initial state so that the volume of the cavity 141 is contracted abruptly (FIG. 6(c)). At this time, a part of the ink (liquid material) filled in the cavity 141 is ejected through the nozzle 110 communicating with this cavity 141 in the form of ink droplets due to the compression pressure generated within the cavity 141.

[0091] The diaphragm 121 in each cavity 141 undergoes damped vibration continually by this series of operations (the ink ejection operation by the driving signal from the head driver 33) until an ink droplet is ejected again when the following driving signal (driving voltage) is inputted. Hereinafter, this damped vibration is also referred to as the residual vibration. The residual vibration of the diaphragm 121 is assumed to have an intrinsic vibration frequency that is determined by the acoustic resistance r given by the shapes of

the nozzle 110 and the ink supply port 142, a degree of ink viscosity and the like, the acoustic inertance m given by a weight of ink within the channel (cavity 141), and compliance C_m of the diaphragm 121.

[0092] The computation model of the residual vibration of the diaphragm 121 based on the above assumption will now be described. FIG. 7 is a circuit diagram showing the computation model of simple harmonic vibration on the assumption of the residual vibration of the diaphragm 121. In this way, the computation model of the residual vibration of the diaphragm 121 can be represented by a sound pressure P , and the acoustic inertance m , compliance C_m and acoustic resistance r mentioned above. Then, by computing a step response in terms of a volume velocity u when the sound pressure P is applied to the circuit shown in FIG. 7, following equations are obtained.

[0093]

$$u = \frac{P}{\omega \cdot m} e^{-\alpha t} \cdot \sin \omega t \quad (1)$$

$$\omega = \sqrt{\frac{1}{m \cdot C_m} - \alpha^2} \quad (2)$$

$$\alpha = \frac{r}{2m} \quad (3)$$

[0094] The computation result obtained from the equations described above is compared with the experiment result from an experiment carried out separately as to the residual vibration of the diaphragm 121 after ejection of ink droplets. FIG. 8 is a graph showing the relationship between the experimental value and the computed value of the residual vibration of the diaphragm 121. As can be understood from the graph shown in FIG. 8, two waveforms of the experimental value and the computed value substantially correspond with each other.

[0095] In the meantime, a phenomenon, which ink droplets are not ejected normally through the nozzle 110 even when the above-mentioned ejection operation is carried out, that is, the occurrence of an ejection failure of droplets, may occur in any of the ink jet heads 100 of the head unit 35. As for causes of the occurrence of the ejection failure, as will be described below, (1) intrusion of an air bubble into the cavity 141, (2) drying and thickening (fixing) of ink in the vicinity the nozzle 110, (3) adhesion of paper dust in the vicinity the outlet of the nozzle 110, or the like may be mentioned.

[0096] Once the ejection failure occurs, it typically results in non-ejection of droplets through the nozzle 110, that is, the advent of a droplet non-ejection phenomenon, which gives rise to missing dots in pixels forming an image printed (drawn) on a recording sheet P. Further, in the case of the ejection failure, even when droplets are ejected through the nozzle 110, the ejected droplets do not land on the recording sheet P adequately because a quantity of droplets is too small or the flying direction (trajectory) of droplets is deviated, which also appears as missing dots in pixels. For this reason, hereinafter, an ejection failure of droplets may also be referred to simply as the "missing dot".

[0097] In the following, values of the acoustic resistance r and/or the acoustic inertance m are adjusted on the basis of the comparison result shown in FIG. 8 for each cause of the missing dot (ejection failure) phenomenon (i.e., droplet non-ejection phenomenon) during the printing process, which occurs in the nozzle 110 of the ink jet head 100, so that the computed value and the experimental value of the residual vibration of the diaphragm 121 match (or substantially correspond) with each other. In this regard, three types of causes including intrusion of an air bubble, thickening due to drying, and adhesion of paper dust will be discussed herein.

[0098] First, intrusion of an air bubble into the cavity 141, which is one of the causes of the missing dot, will be discussed. FIG. 9 is a conceptual view in the vicinity of the nozzle 110 in a case where an air bubble B has intruded into the cavity 141 of FIG. 3. As shown in FIG. 9, the air bubble B thus generated is assumed to be generated and adhering to the wall surface of the cavity 141 (FIG. 9 shows a case where the air bubble B is adhering in the vicinity of the nozzle 110, as one example of the adhesion position of the air bubble B).

[0099] When the air bubble B has intruded into the cavity 141 in this manner, a total weight of ink filling the cavity 141 is thought to decrease, which in turn lowers the acoustic inertance m . Because the air bubble B is adhering to the wall surface of the cavity 141, the nozzle 110 is thought to become in a state where its diameter is increased in size by the diameter of the air bubble B, which in turn lowers the acoustic resistance r .

[0100] Thus, by setting both the acoustic resistance r and the acoustic inertance m smaller than in the case of FIG. 8 where ink is ejected normally, to be matched with the experimental value of the residual vibration in the case of intrusion of an air bubble, the result (graph) as shown in FIG. 10 was obtained. As can be understood from the graphs of FIGS. 8 and 10, in the case of intrusion of an air bubble into the cavity 141, a residual vibration waveform, characterized in that the frequency becomes higher than in the case of normal ejection, is obtained. In this regard, it can also be confirmed that the damping rate of amplitude of the residual vibration becomes smaller as the acoustic resistance r is lowered, and the amplitude of the residual vibration thus becomes smaller slowly.

[0101] Next, drying (fixing and thickening) of ink in the vicinity of the nozzle 110, which is another cause of the missing

dot, will be discussed. FIG. 11 is a conceptual view in the vicinity of the nozzle 110 in a case where ink has fixed due to drying in the vicinity of the nozzle 110 of FIG. 3. As shown in FIG. 11, in a case where ink has fixed due to drying in the vicinity of the nozzle 110, ink within the cavity 141 is in a situation that the ink is trapped within the cavity 141. When ink dries and thickens in the vicinity of the nozzle 110 in this manner, the acoustic resistance r is thought to increase.

[0102] Thus, by setting the acoustic resistance r larger than in the case of FIG. 8 where ink is ejected normally, to be matched with the experimental value of the residual vibration in the case of fixing (thickening) of ink caused by drying in the vicinity of the nozzle 110, the result (graph) as shown in FIG. 12 was obtained. In this case, the experimental values shown in FIG. 12 are those obtained by measuring the residual vibration of the diaphragm 121 in a state where the head unit 35 was allowed to stand for a few days without attaching a cap (not shown), so that ink could not be ejected because the ink within the cavity 141 had dried and thickened (the ink had fixed) in the vicinity of the nozzle 110. As can be understood from the graphs of FIGS. 8 and 12, in the case where ink has thickened due to drying in the vicinity of the nozzle 110, a residual vibration waveform, characterized in that not only the frequency becomes extremely low compared with the case of normal ejection, but also the residual vibration is over-damped, is obtained. This is because, when the diaphragm 121 moves upward in FIG. 3 after the diaphragm 121 is attracted downward in FIG. 3 in order to eject an ink droplet and ink thereby flows into the cavity 141 from the reservoir 143, there is no escape for the ink within the cavity 141 and the diaphragm 121 suddenly becomes unable to vibrate anymore (i.e., the diaphragm 121 becomes over-damped).

[0103] Next, adhesion of paper dust in the vicinity of the outlet of the nozzle 110, which is still another cause of the missing dot, will be described. FIG. 13 is a conceptual view

in the vicinity of the nozzle 110 in the case of adhesion of paper dust in the vicinity of the outlet of the nozzle 110 of FIG. 3. As shown in FIG. 13, in the case where paper dust is adhering in the vicinity of the outlet of the nozzle 110, not only ink seeps out from the cavity 141 via paper dust, but also it becomes impossible to eject ink through the nozzle 110. In the case where paper dust is adhering in the vicinity of the outlet of the nozzle 110 and ink seeps out from the nozzle 110 in this manner, a quantity of ink within the cavity 141 and ink seeping out when viewed from the diaphragm 121 is thought to increase compared with the normal state, which in turn causes the acoustic inertance m to increase. Further, fibers of the paper dust adhering in the vicinity of the outlet of the nozzle 110 are thought to cause the acoustic resistance r to increase.

[0104] Thus, by setting both the acoustic inertance m and the acoustic resistance r larger than in the case of FIG. 8 where ink is ejected normally, to be matched with the experimental value of the residual vibration in the case of adhesion of paper dust in the vicinity of the outlet of the nozzle 110, the result (graph) as shown in FIG. 14 was obtained. As can be understood from the graphs of FIGS. 8 and 14, in the case where paper dust is adhering in the vicinity of the outlet of the nozzle 110, a residual vibration waveform, characterized in that the frequency becomes lower than in the case of normal ejection, is obtained (it is also understood from the graphs of FIGS. 12 and 14 that the frequency of the residual vibration in the case of adhesion of paper dust is higher than that in the case of thickening ink). FIG. 15 shows pictures of the states of the nozzle 110 before and after adhesion of paper dust. It can be seen from FIG. 15(b) that once paper dust adheres in the vicinity of the outlet of the nozzle 110, ink seeps out along the paper dust.

[0105] Note that in both the cases where ink has thickened due to drying in the vicinity of the nozzle 110 and where paper

dust is adhering in the vicinity of the outlet of the nozzle 110, the frequency of the damped vibration is lower than in the case where ink droplets are ejected normally. Hence, a comparison is made, for example, with a predetermined threshold in the frequency, the cycle or the phase of the damped vibration to identify these two causes of the missing dot (non-ejection of ink, i.e., ejection failure) from the waveform of the residual vibration of the diaphragm 121, or alternatively the causes can be identified from a change of the cycle of the residual vibration (damped vibration) or the damping rate of a change in amplitude. In this way, an ejection failure of the respective ink jet heads 100 can be detected from a change of the residual vibration of the diaphragm 121, in particular, a change of the frequency thereof, when ink droplets are ejected through the nozzle 110 of each of the ink jet heads 100. Further, by comparing the frequency of the residual vibration in this case with the frequency of the residual vibration in the case of normal ejection, the cause of the ejection failure can be identified.

[0106] Next, the ejection failure detecting means 10 in one embodiment of the invention will now be described. Here, the case where an ejection failure is detected on the basis of a time period until residual vibration of the diaphragm 121 occurs at a normal ejection operation will be described. FIG. 16 schematically shows the ejection failure detecting means 10 shown in FIG. 2 in one embodiment of the invention, and is a block diagram showing a switching operation between an oscillation circuit (oscillation means) 11 and a driving circuit 18. As shown in FIG. 16, the ejection failure detecting means 10 of the invention is constituted from an oscillation circuit 11, a subtraction counter 45, a normal count value memory 46, a comparison reference value memory 47, and judging means 20. In this regard, a judgment result of the judging means 20 is stored in the storage means 62 at predetermined timing (timing of input of an Ls signal). In the following, each component of the ejection failure detecting means 10 shown in FIG. 16 will

be described.

[0107] The oscillation means (oscillation circuit) 11 is an oscillation circuit that oscillates on the basis of the residual vibration of the diaphragm 121 of the electrostatic actuator 120, and outputs an oscillation signal (pulse signal) to the subtraction counter 45. First, the operation of the oscillation circuit 11 will be described. FIG. 17 is a conceptual view in the case where the electrostatic actuator 120 of FIG. 3 is assumed as a parallel plate capacitor. FIG. 18 is a circuit diagram of the oscillation circuit 11 including the capacitor constituted from the electrostatic actuator 120 of FIG. 3. In this case, the oscillation circuit 11 shown in FIG. 18 is a CR oscillation circuit using the hysteresis characteristic of a schmitt trigger. However, in the invention, the oscillation circuit is not limited to such a CR oscillation circuit, and any oscillation circuit can be used provided that it is an oscillation circuit using an electric capacitance component (capacitor C) of the actuator (including the diaphragm). The oscillation circuit 11 may comprise, for example, the one using an LC oscillation circuit. Further, this embodiment describes an example case using a schmitt trigger inverter 111; however, a CR oscillation circuit using inverters in three stages may be formed.

[0108] In the ink jet head 100 shown in FIG. 3, as described above, the diaphragm 121 and the segment electrode 122 spaced apart therefrom by an extremely small interval (clearance) together form the electrostatic actuator 120 that forms the counter electrodes. The electrostatic actuator 120 can be deemed as the parallel plate capacitor as shown in FIG. 17. In the case where C is the electric capacitance of the capacitor, S is the surface area of each of the diaphragm 121 and the segment electrode 122, g is a distance (gap length) between the two electrodes 121 and 122, and ϵ is a dielectric constant of the space (clearance) sandwiched by both electrodes (if ϵ_0 is a dielectric constant in vacuum and ϵ_r is a specific dielectric

constant in the clearance, then $\epsilon = \epsilon_0 \times \epsilon_r$), then an electric capacitance $C(x)$ of the capacitor (electrostatic actuator 120) shown in FIG. 17 can be expressed by the following equation.

[0109]

$$C(x) = \epsilon_0 \cdot \epsilon_r \frac{S}{g - x} \quad (F) \quad (4)$$

[0110] As shown in FIG. 17, x in Equation (4) above indicates a displacement quantity of the diaphragm 121 from the reference position thereof, caused by the residual vibration of the diaphragm 121.

[0111] As can be understood from Equation (4) above, the smaller the gap length g (i.e., gap length g - displacement quantity x) is, the larger the electric capacitance $C(x)$ becomes, and conversely, the larger the gap length g (gap length g - displacement quantity x) is, the smaller the electric capacitance $C(x)$ becomes. In this manner, the electric capacitance $C(x)$ is inversely proportional to (gap length g - displacement quantity x) (the gap length g when x is 0). In this regard, for the electrostatic actuator 120 shown in FIG. 3, a specific dielectric constant, $\epsilon_r = 1$, because the clearance is fully filled with air.

[0112] Further, because ink droplets (ink dots) to be ejected become finer with an increase of the resolution of the droplet ejection apparatus (the ink jet printer 1 in this embodiment), the electrostatic actuator 120 is increased in density and decreased in size. The surface area S of the diaphragm 121 of the ink jet head 100 thus becomes smaller and a smaller electrostatic actuator 120 is assembled. Furthermore, the gap length g of the electrostatic actuator 120 that varies with the residual vibration caused by ink droplet ejection is

approximately one tenth of the initial gap g_0 . Hence, as can be understood from Equation (4) above, a quantity of change of the electric capacitance of the electrostatic actuator 120 takes an extremely small value.

[0113] In order to detect a quantity of change of the electric capacitance of the electrostatic actuator 120 (which varies with the vibration pattern of the residual vibration), a method as follows is used, that is, a method of forming an oscillation circuit as the one shown in FIG. 18 on the basis of the electric capacitance of the electrostatic actuator 120, and analyzing the frequency (cycle) of the residual vibration on the basis of the oscillated signal. The oscillation circuit 11 shown in FIG. 18 comprises a capacitor (C) constituted from the electrostatic actuator 120, a schmitt trigger inverter 111, and a resistor element (R) 112.

[0114] In the case where an output signal from the schmitt trigger inverter 111 is in the high level, the capacitor C is charged via the resistor element 112. When the charged voltage in the capacitor C (a potential difference between the diaphragm 121 and the segment electrode 122) reaches an input threshold voltage V_{T+} of the schmitt trigger inverter 111, the output signal from the schmitt trigger inverter 111 inverts to a low level. Then, when the output signal from the schmitt trigger inverter 111 shifts to the low level, electric charges charged in the capacitor C via the resistor element 112 are discharged. When the voltage of the capacitor C reaches the input threshold voltage V_{T-} of the schmitt trigger inverter 111 through this discharge, the output signal from the schmitt trigger inverter 111 inverts again to the high level. Thereafter, this oscillation operation is carried out repetitively.

[0115] Here, in order to detect a change with time of the electric capacitance of the capacitor C in each of the above-mentioned phenomena (intrusion of an air bubble, drying,

adhesion of paper dust, and normal ejection), it is required that the oscillation frequency of the oscillation circuit 11 is set to an oscillation frequency at which the frequency in the case of intrusion of an air bubble (see FIG. 10), where the frequency of the residual vibration is the highest, can be detected. For this reason, the oscillation frequency of the oscillation circuit 11 has to be increased, for example, to a few or several tens of times or more than the frequency of the residual vibration to be detected, that is, it has to be set to one or more orders of magnitude higher than the frequency in the case of intrusion of an air bubble. In this case, it is preferable to set the oscillation frequency to an oscillation frequency at which the residual vibration frequency in the case of intrusion of an air bubble can be detected, because the frequency of the residual vibration in the case of intrusion of an air bubble shows a high frequency in comparison with the case of normal ejection. Otherwise, it is impossible to detect the frequency of the residual vibration accurately for the phenomenon of the ejection failure. In this embodiment, therefore, a time constant of the CR in the oscillation circuit 11 is set in accordance with the oscillation frequency. By setting the oscillation frequency of the oscillation circuit 11 high in this manner, it is possible to detect the residual vibration waveform more accurately on the basis of a minute change of the oscillation frequency.

[0116] The driving circuit 18 is a circuit for generating a drive waveform for the electrostatic actuator 120 as shown in the timing chart of FIG. 19 described later. In this regard, although it is not shown in the drawings, the driving circuit 18 is provided with ejection selecting means (selector) for selecting the nozzle 110 of any ink jet head 100 in the plurality of ink jet heads 100, through which an ink droplet is ejected.

[0117] The switching means 23 is a switch (switching circuit) for switching the connection of the electrostatic actuator 120

between the driving circuit 18 and the oscillation circuit 11. the switching means 23 connects the electrostatic actuator 120 to the driving circuit 18 to drive the electrostatic actuator 120. As described above, when the driving signal (voltage signal) is inputted from the driving circuit 18 to the diaphragm 121, the electrostatic actuator 120 starts to be driven, and the diaphragm 121 is attracted toward the segment electrode 122. Then, when the applied voltage drops to 0, the diaphragm 121 displaces abruptly in a direction to move away from the segment electrode 122 and starts to vibrate (residual vibration). At this time, an ink droplet is ejected through the nozzle 110 of the ink jet head 100.

[0118] When the pulse of the driving signal falls, the driving/detection switching signal is inputted into the switching means 23 in sync with the falling edge thereof (see the timing chart of FIG. 19), and the switching means 23 switches the connection of the diaphragm 121 from the driving circuit 18 to the ejection failure detecting means (detection circuit) 10, so that the electrostatic actuator 120 (used as the capacitor of the oscillation circuit 11) is connected to the ejection failure detecting means 10. This makes the oscillation circuit 11 oscillate, and the oscillation signal is outputted to the subtraction counter 45.

[0119] When a predetermined count value is inputted from the normal count value memory 46, the subtraction counter 45 holds the value. Then, when the oscillation signal (pulse signal) is inputted from the oscillation circuit 11, the subtraction counter 45 subtracts the number of pulses generated for a predetermined time period (a predetermined time) from the predetermined count value. In this regard, the predetermined time period is, for example, a time period until the residual vibration of the diaphragm 121 is generated after an ink droplet has been normally ejected from the inkjet head 100; a time period until a half cycle of the residual vibration of the diaphragm

121 after an ink droplet has been normally ejected from the ink jet head 100; a time period until a quarter cycle of the residual vibration of the diaphragm 121 after an ink droplet has been normally ejected from the ink jet head 100; or the like. Further, the predetermined count value stored in the normal count value memory 46 is the number of pulses counted for the predetermine time period mentioned above at a normal ejection operation.

[0120] As shown in the timing chart of FIG. 19, the subtraction counter 45 obtains the predetermined count value (normal count value) from the normal count value memory 46 at the timing when a Load signal is inputted, and opens a gate to receive the oscillation pulses that is the output signal from the oscillation circuit 11 while the driving/detection switching signal is in a high level, thereby subtracting the number of oscillation pulses from the normal count value.

[0121] The judging means 20 compares the subtraction result obtained in the subtraction processing of the subtraction counter 45 with a predetermined reference value inputted from the comparison reference value memory 47. Then, at the input timing of the Ls signal, the judgment result of the judging means 20 is held, and outputted to the storage means 62. In this regard, the predetermined reference value may be set up from some reference values (thresholds), and it is possible to detect and judge a cause of the ejection failure described above (i.e., intrusion of an air bubble, adhesion of paper dust and thickening due to drying) by comparing the judgment result with each of the some reference values. The operation in detail will be described later.

[0122] It should be noted that the normal count memory 46 and the comparison reference value memory 47 may be respectively provided in the ink jet printer 1 as separate memories, and may be shared with the EEPROM (storage means) 62 in the control section 6. Further, such subtraction count processing may be

carried out at a driving halt period at which the electrostatic actuators 120 in the ink jet printer 1 are not driven. This makes it possible to carry out detection of an ejection failure without deteriorating the throughput of the ink jet printer 1.

[0123] Next, the operation of the ejection failure detecting means 10 of the invention will be described with reference to the timing chart of FIG. 19. A method of generating a Load signal, an Ls signal and a CLR signal shown in FIGS. 16 and 19 will be first described. As shown in the timing chart of FIG. 19, the Load signal is a signal that becomes a high level for a short time right before a rising edge of the driving signal outputted from the driving circuit 18. The Ls signal is a signal that becomes a high level in sync with a falling edge of the driving /detection switching signal inputted to the switching means 23 and holds in the high level for a predetermined time (enough time to store the judgment result into the storage means 62). Further, it is not shown in the timing chart of FIG. 19, but the CLR signal is a signal to clear the subtraction result held in the subtraction counter 45 in the subtraction processing, and is inputted to the subtraction counter 45 at predetermined timing until the Load signal is inputted after the output of the Ls signal.

[0124] The ejection failure detecting means 10 operates in response to a group of signals generated in this way. When the Load signal is inputted to the subtraction counter 45 right before the rising edge of the driving signal outputted from the driving circuit 18, a normal count value is inputted to the normal count value memory 46 and held therein at this timing. In this regard, input timing of the Load signal is not limited to the above timing, and it may be any timing until the driving period is terminated after the Ls signal is inputted. When the ejection driving operation of the ink jet head 100 is terminated, the driving/detection switching signal is inputted to the switching means 23 in sync with the falling edge of the driving signal.

Then, the switching means 23 switches the connection of the electrostatic actuator 120 from the driving circuit 18 to the oscillation circuit 11 in response to the driving/detection switching signal.

[0125] The capacitance C in the oscillation circuit 11 is varied in response to the residual vibration of the diaphragm 121, whereby the oscillation circuit 11 starts to oscillate. The subtraction counter 45 opens the gate in sync with the rising edge of the driving/detection switching signal, and carries out the subtraction processing, in which the number of pulses is subtracted from the normal count value, while the driving/detection switching signal remains in the high level (i.e., for the time period T_s). The time period T_s is a time period until the residual vibration of the diaphragm 121 occurs (the residual vibration is generated) after a normal ejection operation, and more specifically, it is a time period until the diaphragm 121 returns to the position, where the diaphragm 121 is positioned when the electrostatic actuator 120 is not driven, after an ink droplet was ejected from the ink jet head 100.

[0126] In the timing chart of FIG. 19, after switching the connection from the driving circuit 18 to the ejection failure detecting means 10, the judgment of the ejection failure is carried out on the basis of the normal count value in the time period until the residual vibration of the diaphragm 121 occurs. The driving/detection switching signal falls to the low level and the L_s signal is generated at the timing when the residual vibration occurs (i.e., at the timing when the diaphragm 121 returns to a initial state position). Then, the judging means 20 carries out predetermined judgment processing on the basis of the subtraction result of the subtraction counter 45, and the judgment result is stored into the storage means 62. In this regard, the reference values N_1 , N_2 , P_1 and P_2 will be described later.

[0127] FIG. 20 is a drawing showing temporal transition of oscillation frequencies, which are outputted from the oscillation circuit 11 by connecting the electrostatic actuator 120 to the oscillation circuit 11 with the switching means 23 after applying the driving signal. In this graph shown in Fig. 20, the perpendicular axis represents changes in the outputted oscillation frequency, and the horizontal axis represents a elapsed time thereof. The temporally transitional changes in the oscillation frequency show residual vibration waveforms in the respective states of the ink jet head 100. As shown in FIG. 20, it is possible to obtain the results in which the cycle of the residual vibration at intrusion of an air bubble is shorter than that in the normal ejection operation, and the cycle of the residual vibration at adhesion of paper dust or thickening due to drying is longer than that in the normal ejection operation. Here, the oscillation frequencies of the oscillation circuit 11 vary with the state of the respective residual vibration. The respective states are compared with the state at the normal ejection operation for the time period T_s until the diaphragm 121 returns to the position (initial position) of the diaphragm 121 when the electrostatic actuator 120 is not driven. In the case of the intrusion of an air bubble, the residual vibration waveform rises until the end of the time period T_s , and the oscillation pulses in which the oscillation frequency of the oscillation circuit 11 is higher than that at the normal ejection operation are outputted. On the other hand, in the case of drying (thickening), the residual vibration waveform does not rise until the end of the time period T_s , and the oscillation pulses in which the oscillation frequency of the oscillation circuit 11 is lower than that at the normal ejection operation are outputted. Therefore, because the number of oscillation pulses of the oscillation circuit 11 varies with the difference between the cycles of the residual vibration, that is, the difference between the frequencies of the residual vibration, it is possible to carry out the ejection failure judging processing by the judging means 20 on the basis of the subtraction result of the

subtraction counter 45.

[0128] Next, an example of a subtraction result of the subtraction counter 45 is shown. FIG. 21 is a graph showing one example of a subtraction result of the subtraction counter 45 and a judgment result of the judging means 20 based on the subtraction result. As described above, the cycle of the residual vibration when an air bubble has been intruded is shorter than in the case of the normal ejection operation, and the cycle of the residual vibration when the ink is thickening due to drying is longer than in the case of the normal ejection operation. Thus, by setting up at least two reference values as reference values to be stored in the comparison reference value memory 47, it is possible to differentiate the ejection failure state from the normal ejection state (in this case, only reference values N1 and P1 may be set up). However, it is preferable to set up three or four reference values, whereby it is possible to judge three types of ejection failure states mentioned above on the basis of whether or not the subtraction result obtained by the subtraction processing is larger than each of these reference values.

[0129] In the graph of FIG. 21, four reference values P2, P1, N1 and N2 are set up as the reference values for the subtraction result. The reference values N1 and N2 are set up as a first threshold. In the case where the subtraction result is smaller than the first threshold, the judging means 20 judges that the cause of the ejection failure is intrusion of an air bubble. In this regard, in the case where the subtraction result is smaller than the reference value N1 and larger than the reference value N2, it may be judged that a minute air bubble has intruded into the cavity 141. Further, in the case where the subtraction result is smaller than the reference value N2, it may be judged that a large amount of air bubbles has intruded into the cavity 141. In this case, by changing a pump-suction time or a pump-suction pressure, for example, in accordance with a large

or small amount of air bubbles, it is possible to carry out appropriate recovery processing. In the case where such a judgment is not particularly required, the intrusion of an air bubble may be judged using only the reference value N1. Moreover, the reference value P2 is set up as a second threshold. In the case where the subtraction result is larger than the second threshold, the judging means 20 judges that the cause of the ejection failure is thickening due to drying. Furthermore, the reference value P1 is set up as a third threshold. In the case where the subtraction result is larger than the third threshold and smaller than the second threshold, the judging means 20 judges that the cause of the ejection failure is adhesion of paper dust.

[0130] In this regard, P1, P2, N1 and N2 are respectively set up to +3, +10, -3 and -10 (i.e., $P1 = +3$, $P2 = +10$, $N1 = -3$, and $N2 = -10$) as these reference values in FIG. 21. In the case where the absolute value of the subtraction result is over the absolute value of each of the reference values, the judging means 20 outputs "1" as a judgment result. FIG. 22 shows the relationship between the causes of the ejection failure and outputs of the respective reference values. The judging means 20 can judge presence or absence of an ejection failure and a cause thereof on the basis of the respective reference values.

[0131] Further, it is preferable that these reference values are obtained in advance by means of experiments. This is because a cycle of the residual vibration of the diaphragm 121 when an ink droplet has been ejected from the ink jet head 100 is determined on the basis of the configuration of the ink jet head 100, that is, the configuration of the cavity 141 or the like.

[0132] Next, ejection failure detecting processing when an ejection failure is detected on the basis of the time period until the residual vibration of the diaphragm 121 is generated (occurs). FIG. 23 is a flowchart showing ejection failure

detecting processing in one embodiment of the invention. When printing data to be printed (or ejection data used for the flushing operation) is inputted into the control section 6 from the host computer 8 via the interface (IF) 9, the ejection failure detection processing is carried out at the predetermined timing. In this regard, in the flowchart shown in FIG. 23, the ejection failure detection processing corresponding to an ink ejection operation of one ink jet head 100, that is, one nozzle 110, will be described for ease of explanation.

[0133] Initially, the Load signal is inputted into the subtraction counter 45 at the timing right before input of the driving signal (here, it is not limited to this timing), the normal count value is inputted (preset) from the normal count value memory 46 (Step S101). Then, the driving signal corresponding to the printing data (ejection data) is inputted from the driving circuit 18 of the head driver 33, whereby the driving signal (voltage signal) is applied between both electrodes of the electrostatic actuator 120 according to the timing of the driving signal as shown in the timing chart of FIG. 19 (Step S102). The control section 6 then judges whether or not input of the driving signal (voltage signal) into the electrostatic actuator 120 is terminated (Step S103). In the case where it is judged that the input of the driving signal is terminated, the driving/detection switching signal is inputted into the switching means 23 from the control section 6.

[0134] When the driving/detection switching signal is inputted into the switching means 23, the electrostatic actuator 120, that is, the capacitor constituting the oscillation circuit 11 is isolated from the driving circuit 18 by the switching means 23, and is connected to the ejection failure detecting means 10 (detection circuit) side, that is, to the oscillation circuit 11 of the residual vibration detecting means 16 (Step S104). Subsequently, the oscillation circuit 11 is constituted on the

basis of a capacitance (capacitor) of the electrostatic actuator 120 (Step S105), and the oscillation pulses are outputted from the oscillation circuit 11 (Step S106). When the oscillation pulses are inputted into the subtraction counter 45, the subtraction counter 45 subtracts the number of oscillation pulses from the normal count value (Step S107). This subtraction processing is carried out until a predetermined count time period, that is, for the time period until the residual vibration is generated after the switching means 23 carried out the switching operation is terminated. When the count time period is terminated (Step S108), the processing proceeds to the judging processing.

[0135] At Step S109, the judging means 20 judges whether or not the number of oscillation pulses is within a region for the normal count value (i.e., the region between the reference values N1 and P1) on the basis of the subtraction result of the subtraction counter 45. In the case where it is judged that the subtraction result is within the normal count value, the judging means 20 judges that the ink droplet has been normally ejected (Step S110). On the other hand, in the case where the subtraction result is not within the normal count value, the judging means 20 judges that the ink jet head 100 is in an ejection failure state (i.e., the ink jet head 100 has a failure nozzle 110) (Step S111).

[0136] Subsequently, the judgment result by the judging means 20 is stored (held) in the storage means 62 (Step S112). In response to the driving/detection switching signal, the connection of the electrostatic actuator 120 is switched from the oscillation circuit 11 to the driving circuit 18, thereby stopping the oscillation of the oscillation circuit 11 (Step S113). At Step S114, it is judged whether or not the ejection driving processing is terminated. In the case where it is judged that this processing is terminated, the ejection failure detecting processing is terminated. On the other hand, in the

case where it is judged that this processing is not terminated, the control section 6 proceeds to Step S101 and repeats the processing in the same manner.

[0137] In this way, in the ejection failure detecting processing of the invention, it is possible to detect presence or absence of an ejection failure for the ink jet head 100 and a cause of the ejection failure in the event of ejection failure are detected with a simple configuration by subtracting the number of oscillation pulses from the normal count value and comparing the subtraction result with a predetermined reference value.

[0138] Next, ejection failure detecting means 10 in another embodiment of the invention will be described. Here, the case where an ejection failure is detected in response to a time period of every half or quarter cycle at the normal ejection operation will be explained. FIG. 24 is a schematic block diagram of the ejection failure detecting means 10 shown in FIG. 2 in another embodiment of the invention. In this regard, only components different from those in FIG. 16 will be described, the components having similar functions to those in the block diagram of FIG. 16 are designated as the same reference numerals, and explanations thereof will be omitted.

[0139] The ejection failure detecting means 10 is provided with an oscillation circuit 11, a subtraction counter 45, a normal value memory 46 including a plurality of normal value memory sections 46a through 46n, a first selector 48a for selecting any one of these normal value memory sections 46a through 46n, a first comparison reference value memory 47a, first judging means 20a, storage means 62 including a plurality of storage sections 62a through 62n, a second selector 48b for selecting any one of these storage sections 62a through 62n, a second comparison reference value memory 47b, and second judging means 20b.

[0140] The first selector 48a selects a normal count value (stored in the normal count value memory section) to be inputted into the subtraction counter 45 at the predetermined timing of the residual vibration at the normal ejection operation. The second selector 48b selects one of the storage sections 62a through 62n (in the storage means 62) for storing a judgment result of the first judging means 20a (it has a same configuration of the judging means 20 described above) in response to one of the normal count value memory sections 46a through 46n selected by the first selector 48a.

[0141] The second judging means 20 finally judges presence or absence of an ejection failure of the ink jet head 100 and a cause thereof on the basis of the judgment results stored in the plurality of storage sections 62a through 62n (in the storage means 62) as shown in tables of FIG. 29. In this regard, sequences as shown in the tables of FIG. 29 are stored in the second comparison reference value memory 47b.

[0142] FIG. 25 shows residual vibration waveforms in the case where a count time period is a half cycle of the residual vibration at a normal ejection operation. FIG. 26 shows residual vibration waveforms in the case where a count time period is a quarter cycle of the residual vibration at a normal ejection operation. In this embodiment, the subtraction counter 45 carries out the subtraction processing for a first half cycle or a first quarter cycle, or every half or quarter cycle, of the residual vibration at the normal ejection operation, and the second judging means 20b carries out the detection and judgment of an ejection failure on the basis of the plurality of subtraction results.

[0143] The operation of the ejection failure detecting means 10 will now be described with reference to a timing chart in FIG. 27. FIG. 27 is a timing chart (every half cycle) of the

subtraction processing of the subtraction counter 45 shown in FIG. 24. When a first driving signal is inputted right before input of a driving signal, a normal count value 1 is inputted into the subtraction counter 45. The subtraction counter 45 opens a gate in sync with a falling edge of the driving signal to start the subtraction processing. An Ls signal is inputted to the storage means 62 at the occurrence of the residual vibration (i.e., at the time when the diaphragm 121 first returns to a steady-state position (an initial position)), and the subtraction result at this time thereby is stored in the storage section 62a. The CLR signal and Load signal are inputted into the subtraction counter 45 at this time, and then the subtraction result until this time is cleared and the following normal count value 2 is inputted from the normal count value memory 46 to the subtraction counter 45.

[0144] Hereinafter, the same subtraction processing is repeated, whereby the subtraction results from the respective normal count values are stored in the storage means 62. When comparison reference values (see the tables in FIG. 29) are inputted from the second comparison reference value 47b, the second judging means 20b finally judges presence or absence of an ejection failure of the corresponding ink jet head 100 and a cause of the ejection failure on the basis of the comparison reference values.

[0145] In this regard, FIG. 28 is a drawing showing one example (the cases of every half cycle and every quarter cycle are respectively shown in FIG. 28(A) and 28(B)) of the subtraction results of the subtraction counter 45 and the judgment result of the second judging means 20b based on the subtraction results. FIG. 29 is a drawing showing a relationship between the causes of the ejection failure and the outputs of the respective reference values (the cases of every half cycle and every quarter cycle are respectively shown in FIG. 29(A) and 29(B)). By carrying out the judging processing with the use of the

subtraction results corresponding to the plurality of time periods in this way, it is possible to carry out the ejection failure judging processing more accurately.

[0146] Next, the ejection failure detecting processing in the case where an ejection failure is detected in response to the time periods for every half cycle or every quarter cycle of the residual vibration at the normal ejection operation will now be described. FIG. 30 is a flowchart showing the ejection failure detecting processing in another embodiment of the invention. As well as the flowchart of FIG. 23, the ejection failure detecting processing is carried out at predetermined timing such as the timing when printing data is inputted into the ink jet printer 1.

[0147] Initially, the Load signal is inputted into the subtraction counter 45 at the timing right before input of the driving signal (here, it is not limited to this timing), the normal count value is inputted (preset) from the normal count value memory 46 (Step S201). Then, the driving signal corresponding to the printing data (ejection data) is inputted from the driving circuit 18 of the head driver 33, whereby the driving signal (voltage signal) is applied between both electrodes of the electrostatic actuator 120 according to the timing of the driving signal as shown in the timing chart of FIG. 27 (Step S202). The control section 6 then judges whether or not input of the driving signal (voltage signal) into the electrostatic actuator 120 is terminated (Step S203). In the case where it is judged that the input of the driving signal is terminated, the driving/detection switching signal is inputted into the switching means 23 from the control section 6.

[0148] When the driving/detection switching signal is inputted into the switching means 23, the electrostatic actuator 120, that is, the capacitor constituting the oscillation circuit

11 is isolated from the driving circuit 18 by the switching means 23, and is connected to the ejection failure detecting means 10 (detection circuit) side, that is, to the oscillation circuit 11 of the residual vibration detecting means 16 (Step S204). Subsequently, the oscillation circuit 11 is constituted on the basis of a capacitance (capacitor) of the electrostatic actuator 120 (Step S205), and the oscillation pulses are outputted from the oscillation circuit 11 (Step S206). When the oscillation pulses are inputted into the subtraction counter 45, the subtraction counter 45 subtracts the number of oscillation pulses from the first normal count value 1 (Step S207). This subtraction processing is carried out until a predetermined count time period, that is, for the time period until the residual vibration is generated after the switching means 23 carried out the switching operation is terminated. When the count time period is terminated (Step S208), the processing proceeds to the judging processing.

[0149] At Step S209, the first judging means 20a judges whether or not the number of oscillation pulses is within a region for the normal count value (i.e., the region between the reference values N1 and P1) on the basis of the subtraction result of the subtraction counter 45. In the case where it is judged that the subtraction result is within the normal count value, the first judging means 20a judges that the ink droplet has been normally ejected (Step S210). On the other hand, in the case where the subtraction result is not within the normal count value, the first judging means 20a judges that the ink jet head 100 is in an ejection failure state (i.e., the ink jet head 100 has a failure nozzle 110) (Step S211).

[0150] Subsequently, the judgment result by the first judging means 20a is stored (held) in the storage section 62a of the storage means 62 (Step S212). The control section 6 judges whether or not the subtraction processing is terminated for all the count time periods (Step S213). In this case, because the

subtraction processing is not carried out for every half or quarter cycle of the residual vibration, the control section 6 proceeds to Step S214, and the count time period instruction signal increments by one (see the timing chart of FIG. 27). Thus, the following storage section 62b is selected by the second selector 48b (Step S215), and the following normal count value memory section 46b is selected by the first selector 48a to preset the normal count value 2 to the subtraction counter 45 (Step S216). Then, the control section 6 repeats the same processing after Step S207.

[0151] In the case where it is judged at Step S213 that the subtraction processing (first judging processing) is terminated for all the count time periods, the connection of the electrostatic actuator 120 is switched from the oscillation circuit 11 to the driving circuit 18 in response to the driving/detection switching signal, thereby stopping the oscillation of the oscillation circuit 11 (Step S217). The second judging means 20b carries out the ejection failure judging processing for the ink jet head 100 on the basis of the first judgment results stored in the plurality of storage sections 62a through 62n (in the storage means 62) and the second comparison reference values (Step S218). At Step S219, it is judged whether or not the ejection driving processing is terminated. In the case where it is judged that this processing is terminated, the ejection failure detecting processing is terminated. On the other hand, in the case where it is judged that this processing is not terminated, the control section 6 proceeds to Step S201 and repeats the processing in the same manner.

[0152] In this way, in the ejection failure detecting processing of the invention, it is possible to detect presence or absence of an ejection failure for the ink jet head 100 and a cause of the ejection failure in the event of ejection failure are detected with a simple configuration by subtracting the

number of oscillation pulses from the respective normal count values at a plurality of times and comparing these subtraction results with predetermined reference values.

[0153] As described above, in the droplet ejection apparatus (ink jet printer 1) and the method of judging an ejection failure of the present embodiment, when the operation in which liquid is ejected from the ink jet head 100 in the form of droplets was carried out by driving the electrostatic actuator 120, the oscillation circuit 11 oscillates in response to changes in the electric capacitance of the electrostatic actuator 120. The subtraction counter 45 subtracts the number of oscillation pulses from the normal count value that is a count value at the normal ejection operation, and the judging means 20 judges whether or not the droplet has been normally ejected (normal ejection or ejection failure) and a cause of the ejection failure in the event of ejection failure are detected, on the basis of the subtraction result.

[0154] Therefore, according to the droplet ejection apparatus and the method of judging the ejection failure in the droplet ejection heads of the invention, compared with the conventional droplet ejection apparatus and the droplet ejection head capable of detecting an ejection failure (missing dot) (for example, an optical detecting method), the droplet ejection apparatus of this embodiment as described above does not need other parts (for example, optical missing dot detecting device or the like). As a result, not only an ejection failure of the droplets can be detected accurately without increasing the size of the droplet ejection head, but also the manufacturing costs of the droplet ejection apparatus capable of carrying out an ejection failure (missing dot) detecting processing can be reduced because the circuitry thereof is not complicated. Further, in the droplet ejection apparatus of the invention, because the droplet ejection apparatus detects an ejection failure of the droplets through the use of the residual vibration of the diaphragm after

the droplet ejection operation, an ejection failure of the droplets can be detected even during the printing operation. Hence, even though the method of judging the ejection failure of the invention is carried out during the printing operation, the throughput of the droplet ejection apparatus of the invention will be neither reduced nor deteriorated.

[0155] Moreover, according to the droplet ejection apparatus of the invention, it is possible to judge a cause of an ejection failure of droplets, which the apparatus such as an optical detecting apparatus capable of carrying out a conventional missing dot detection operation cannot judge. Therefore, it is possible to select and carry out appropriate recovery processing in accordance with the cause if needed.

[0156] (Second Embodiment)

[0157] Examples of other configurations of the ink jet head of the invention will now be described. FIGS. 31-34 are cross sectional views each schematically showing an example of other configuration of the ink jet head 100 (head unit 35). Hereinafter, an explanation will be given with reference to these drawings; however, differences from the first embodiment described above are chiefly described, and the description of the similar portions is omitted.

[0158] An ink jet head 100A shown in FIG. 31 is one that ejects ink (liquid material) within a cavity 208 through a nozzle 203 as a diaphragm 212 vibrates when a piezoelectric element 200 is driven. A metal plate 204 made of stainless steel is bonded to a nozzle plate 202 made of stainless steel in which the nozzle (hole) 203 is formed, via an adhesive film 205, and another metal plate 204 made of stainless steel is further bonded to the first-mentioned metal plate 204 via an adhesive film 205. Furthermore, a communication port forming plate 206 and a cavity plate 207 are sequentially bonded to the second-mentioned metal

plate 204.

[0159] The nozzle plate 202, the metal plates 204, the adhesive films 205, the communication port forming plate 206, and the cavity plate 207 are molded into their respective predetermined shapes (a shape in which a concave portion is formed), and the cavity 208 and a reservoir 209 are defined by laminating these components. The cavity 208 and the reservoir 209 communicate with each other via an ink supply port 210. Further, the reservoir 209 communicates with an ink intake port 211.

[0160] The diaphragm 212 is placed at the upper surface opening portion of the cavity plate 207, and the piezoelectric element 200 is bonded to the diaphragm 212 via a lower electrode 213. Further, an upper electrode 214 is bonded to the piezoelectric element 200 on the opposite side of the lower electrode 213. A head driver 215 is provided with a driving circuit that generates a driving voltage waveform. The piezoelectric element 200 starts to vibrate when a driving voltage waveform is applied (supplied) between the upper electrode 214 and the lower electrode 213, whereby the diaphragm 212 bonded to the piezoelectric element 200 starts to vibrate. The volume (and the internal pressure) of the cavity 208 varies with the vibration of the diaphragm 212, and ink (liquid) filled in the cavity 208 is thereby ejected through the nozzle 203 in the form of droplets.

[0161] A reduced quantity of liquid (ink) in the cavity 208 due to the ejection of droplets is replenished with ink supplied from the reservoir 209. Further, ink is supplied to the reservoir 209 through the ink intake port 211.

[0162] Likewise, an ink jet head 100B shown in FIG. 32 is one that ejects ink (liquid material) within a cavity 221 through a nozzle 223 when the piezoelectric element 200 is driven. The

ink jet head 100B includes a pair of opposing substrates 220, and a plurality of piezoelectric elements 200 are placed intermittently at predetermined intervals between both substrates 220.

[0163] Cavities 221 are formed between adjacent piezoelectric elements 200. A plate (not shown) and a nozzle plate 222 are placed in front and behind the cavities 221 of FIG. 32, respectively, and nozzles (holes) 223 are formed in the nozzle plate 222 at positions corresponding to the respective cavities 221.

[0164] Pairs of electrodes 224 are placed on one and the other surfaces of each piezoelectric element 200. That is to say, four electrodes 224 are bonded to one piezoelectric element 200. When a predetermined driving voltage waveform is applied between predetermined electrodes of these electrodes 224, the piezoelectric element 200 undergoes share-mode deformation and starts to vibrate (indicated by arrows in FIG. 32). The volume of the cavities 221 (internal pressure of cavity) varies with the vibration, and ink (liquid material) filled in the cavities 221 is thereby ejected through nozzles 223 in the form of droplets. In other words, the piezoelectric elements 200 per se function as the diaphragms in the ink jet head 100B.

[0165] Likewise, an ink jet head 100C shown in FIG. 33 is one that ejects ink (liquid material) within a cavity 233 through a nozzle 231 when the piezoelectric element 200 is driven. The ink jet head 100C is provided with a nozzle plate 230 in which the nozzle 231 is formed, spacers 232, and the piezoelectric element 200. The piezoelectric element 200 is placed to be spaced apart from the nozzle plate 230 by a predetermined distance with the spacers 232 in between, and the cavity 233 is defined by a space surrounded by the nozzle plate 230, the piezoelectric element 200, and the spacers 232.

[0166] A plurality of electrodes are bonded to the top surface of the piezoelectric element 200 in FIG. 33. To be more specific, a first electrode 234 is bonded to a substantially central portion of the piezoelectric element 200, and second electrodes 235 are bonded on both sides thereof. When a predetermined driving voltage waveform is applied between the first electrode 234 and the second electrodes 235, the piezoelectric element 200 undergoes shear-mode deformation and starts to vibrate (indicated by arrows of FIG. 33). The volume of the cavity 233 (internal pressure of cavity 233) varies with the vibration, and ink (liquid material) filled in the cavity 233 is thereby ejected through the nozzle 231 in the form of droplets. In other words, the piezoelectric element 200 per se functions as the diaphragm in the ink jet head 100C.

[0167] Likewise, an ink jet head 100D shown in FIG. 34 is one that ejects ink (liquid material) within a cavity 245 through a nozzle 241 when the piezoelectric element 200 is driven. The ink jet head 100D is provided with a nozzle plate 240 in which the nozzle 241 is formed, a cavity plate 242, a diaphragm 243, and a layered piezoelectric element 201 comprising a plurality of piezoelectric elements 200 to be layered.

[0168] The cavity plate 242 is molded into a predetermined shape (a shape in which a concave portion is formed), by which the cavity 245 and a reservoir 246 are defined. The cavity 245 and the reservoir 246 communicate with each other via an ink supply port 247. Further, the reservoir 246 communicates with an ink cartridge 31 via an ink supply tube 311.

[0169] The lower end of the layered piezoelectric element 201 in FIG. 34 is bonded to the diaphragm 243 via an intermediate layer 244. A plurality of external electrodes 248 and internal electrodes 249 are bonded to the layered piezoelectric element 201. To be more specific, the external electrodes 248 are bonded to the outer surface of the layered piezoelectric element 201

and the internal electrodes 249 are provided in spaces between piezoelectric elements 200, which together form the layered piezoelectric element 201 (or inside each piezoelectric element). In this case, the external electrodes 248 and the internal electrodes 249 are placed so that parts of them are alternately layered in the thickness direction of the piezoelectric element 200.

[0170] By applying a driving voltage waveform between the external electrodes 248 and the internal electrodes 249 by the head driver 33, the layered piezoelectric element 201 undergoes deformation (contracts in the vertical direction of FIG. 34) and starts to vibrate as indicated by arrows in FIG. 34, whereby the diaphragms 243 undergoes vibration due to this vibration. The volume of the cavity 245 (internal pressure of cavity 245) varies with the vibration of the diaphragm 243, and ink (liquid material) filled in the cavity 245 is thereby ejected through the nozzle 241 in the form of droplets.

[0171] A reduced quantity of liquid (ink) in the cavity 245 due to the ejection of droplets is replenished with ink supplied from the reservoir 246. Further, ink is supplied to the reservoir 246 from the ink cartridge 31 through the ink supply tube 311.

[0172] As with the electric capacitance type of ink jet head 100 as described above, the ink jet heads 100A through 100D provided with piezoelectric elements are also able to detect an ejection failure of droplets and identify the cause of the ejection failure on the basis of the residual vibration of the diaphragm or the piezoelectric element functioning as the diaphragm. Alternatively, the ink jet heads 100B and 100C may be provided with a diaphragm (diaphragm used to detect the residual vibration) serving as a sensor at a position facing the cavity, so that the residual vibration of this diaphragm is detected.

[0173] As described above, in the droplet ejection apparatus and the method of judging an ejection failure in the droplet ejection heads of the invention, when the operation in which liquid is ejected from a droplet ejection head in the form of droplets was carried out by driving an electrostatic actuator or a piezoelectric actuator, the residual vibration of a diaphragm displaced by the actuator is detected, and it is detected whether or not the droplet has been normally ejected (normal ejection or ejection failure) on the basis of the residual vibration of the diaphragm.

[0174] Further, in the invention, a cause of the ejection failure of the droplets is judged on the basis of a vibration pattern of the residual vibration of the diaphragm (for example, a cycle of a residual vibration waveform).

[0175] Therefore, according to the invention, compared with the conventional droplet ejection apparatus capable of detecting an ejection failure (missing dot), the droplet ejection apparatus of this embodiment as described above does not need other parts (for example, optical missing dot detecting device or the like). As a result, not only an ejection failure of the droplets can be detected without increasing the size of the droplet ejection head, but also the manufacturing costs thereof can be reduced. In addition, in the droplet ejection apparatus of the invention, because the droplet ejection apparatus of the invention detects an ejection failure of the droplets through the use of the residual vibration of the diaphragm after the droplet ejection operation, an ejection failure of the droplets can be detected even during the printing operation.

[0176] Further, according to the invention, it is possible to judge a cause of an ejection failure of droplets, which the apparatus such as an optical detecting apparatus capable of

carrying out a conventional missing dot detection operation cannot judge. Therefore, it is possible to select and carry out appropriate recovery processing in accordance with the cause if needed.

[0177] The droplet ejection apparatus and the method of judging an ejection failure in the droplet ejection heads of the invention have been described based on embodiments shown in the drawings, but it is to be understood that the invention is not limited to these embodiments, and respective portions forming the droplet ejection head or the droplet ejection apparatus can be replaced with an arbitrary arrangement capable of functioning in the same manner. Further, any other arbitrary component may be added to the droplet ejection head or the droplet ejection apparatus of the invention.

[0178] Liquid to be ejected (droplets) that is ejected from a droplet ejection head (ink jet head 100 in the embodiments described above) in the droplet ejection apparatus of the invention is not particularly limited, and for example, it may be liquid (including dispersion liquid such as suspension and emulsion) containing various kinds of materials as follows. Namely, a filter material (ink) for a color filter, a light-emitting material for forming an EL (Electroluminescence) light-emitting layer in an organic EL apparatus, a fluorescent material for forming a fluorescent body on an electrode in an electron emitting device, a fluorescent material for forming a fluorescent body in a PDP (Plasma Display Panel) apparatus, a migration material forming a migration body in an electrophoresis display device, a bank material for forming a bank on the surface of a substrate W, various kinds of coating materials, a liquid electrode material for forming an electrode, a particle material for forming a spacer to provide a minute cell gap between two substrates, a liquid metal material for forming metal wiring, a lens material for forming a microlens, a resist material, a light-scattering material for forming a

light-scattering body, liquid materials for various tests used in a bio-sensor such as a DNA chip and a protein chip, and the like may be mentioned.

[0179] Further, in the invention, a droplet receptor to which droplets are ejected is not limited to paper such as a recording sheet, and it may be other media such as a film, a woven cloth, a non-woven cloth or the like, or a workpiece such as various types of substrates including a glass substrate, a silicon substrate and the like.

[0180] This application claims priority to Japanese Patent Application No. 2003-079202 filed March 20, 2003, which is hereby expressly incorporated by reference herein in its entirety.